



MINDSCAPE

What to Think About Instead of Worrying

TIMOTHY Z. WITMER

“A must-have, must-read, must-share book. Dr. Tim Witmer, a seasoned soul-physician, calmly enters his consulting room. It is full of anxious people. Many have been dosing themselves on narcotic or toxic prescriptions or self-cures but continue to experience personal and relational meltdown. His diagnosis is superbly clear; his prescription is powerful. His prognosis is honest. Even his instructions are a pleasure to read. Plus, his medicine works. Try *Mindscape*—a great book!”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Author; Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX

“Our culture breeds anxiety, anger, and escapism. ‘Anxious about our relationships we are alone together.’ To counter this multi-headed hydra, Tim Witmer gives us a tour of the truly beautiful mind, the biblical mind, that returns us to the sanity of ‘my Father’s world.’”

Paul E. Miller, Director of seeJesus; author of *A Praying Life* and *A Loving Life*

“As colleagues, Tim Witmer and I probably spend a fair amount of time worrying about the same things. It is thus a pleasure to see that he has spent considerable time reflecting on this problem from a biblical and practical perspective. This book is both a work of demolition, as Tim dismantles the myths we tell about ourselves, and of construction, as he focuses the reader’s mind on the great biblical truths that give us both a foundation in, and perspective on, our place in the universe. This is a straightforward pastoral book, which addresses a very real need in the anxious times in which we live.”

Carl R. Trueman, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“I worry. In fact, I worry a lot. Tim Witmer’s biblical and practical book is refreshing for someone like me. He reminds me of the truth and of the rest, joy, and life at the center of the truth. I’ll probably still worry, but I’m going to be a lot better because of this book and you will be too. Read it and be glad!”

Steve Brown, Key Life radio broadcaster; professor (emeritus), Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“Our culture thinks about human problems by focusing on the pathological extremes: panic attacks, anxiety disorders, and the like. But *Mindscape*, like Scripture, starts at the other end of the spectrum. It focuses on those normal ‘pathologies’ that beset all of us who ever feel worried, fearful, or apprehensive. This book is full of good sense because it is full of God and his ways. Wherever *you* land on the anxiety spectrum, take *Mindscape* to heart. You will become a wiser human being, guaranteed!”

David Powlison, Executive Director, CCEF; author

“Do you ever worry? If so, this book is for you. In an age of self-help manuals, theology-lite, and moralistic preaching, *Mindscape* is truly refreshing. Indeed, if carefully read and inwardly digested, it is life-changing. Tim Witmer proclaims a fully sovereign, yet truly comforting God who intervenes in the midst of very real affliction from without and persistent sin from within. He brings the simplicity and depth of the seasoned pastor to the reader. And the gospel of grace is on every page.”

William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics and Boyer Chair in Evangelism and Culture, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“We worriers often see ourselves as victims of the unseen future’s threatening possibilities. With pastoral wisdom and grace-grounded transparency, Tim Witmer summons us to resist anxiety proactively. Paul’s famous directive to replace worry with thankful prayer (Philippians 4:6–7) is just the beginning of God’s agenda to free us from our fears (4:8–9). Christ’s Spirit can refurbish our ‘mindscape,’ replacing preoccupation with what might go wrong with concentration on the Savior, who makes all things gloriously right.”

Dennis E. Johnson, PhD, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary, California; author of *Him We Proclaim*; coauthor of *Counsel from the Cross*

“To be human is to worry. It’s something we all do. You can’t avoid it. With that in mind, Tim Witmer introduces you to Paul while he is in jail in Philippi. Each chapter rivets the reader’s anxious mind on better things to think about. If you find yourself overwhelmed and filled with worry, read Tim’s book. It will give you some wonderful things to think about as well as a gracious Savior to talk to in the midst of it all.”

Dr. Timothy S. Lane, President, Institute for Pastoral Care; coauthor of *How People Change*

“*Mindscape* is a helpful guidebook for any of us who have ever thought wrongly about the issues of life. With pastoral warmth, Dr. Witmer shows us how we can change the way we think and apply the gospel. *Mindscape* shows us that a new way of thinking can lead to a new way of living.”

Scott Thomas, Associate National Director, C2C Network; coauthor of *Gospel Coach*

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To my wife Barbara—

who in my mindscape is an oasis
in the desert of life, who brings me joy
every time I think of her.

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1

What Were You Thinking?



“**W**hat were you thinking?” This is a question commonly heard when people are called to give an account for their actions, or even their words. Disappointed or angry parents speak them to their children. Bosses use this question to express the dismay they have for an underperforming employee. It can also be heard in the hallways of our schools, as teachers seek to get to the bottom of student behavior. There are innumerable other contexts in which the question has been raised throughout human history. You may have even asked yourself, “What was I thinking?” after you did something that was perplexing to yourself!

No matter what context it’s used in, the question points to the fact that we are rational creatures made in the image of God. Human behavior doesn’t just come out of nowhere but is the result of a thoughtful process.

The same truth is revealed when a crime is committed. One of the first questions asked is, “What was the motive?” This is just another way of saying, “What was he thinking? What was the reasoning behind the perpetrator’s actions?” This question was one of the first asked in the wake of the wave of mass killings in recent years. It is expected that even criminals will have “thought through” the reasons for their deeds, regardless of how warped those reasons might be.

Having worked closely with people for over thirty years as a pastor, I have become convinced of the importance of addressing the ways in which we think about the challenges of life. If you would allow us to take a look at the features that define the landscape of your mind—your “mindscape,” as it were—what would we see? What are the thoughts that occupy your mind throughout the day and perhaps into the night? Are you a worrywart? Are you always imagining the worst possible scenario that can happen in any situation? When you think about the future is your mind filled with fear? How do you deal with your day-to-day anxieties? Probably, like most of us, you do worry—about specific situations and things that haven’t even happened yet.

If you had access to the mindscape of another person for twenty-four hours, you would probably be shocked at what you saw. Think about it: How many of *us* would like someone else to have twenty-four hours of access to *our* thought lives? I wouldn’t.

This is particularly alarming as you consider the words of Proverbs 23:7 (NASB): “For as he thinks within himself, so he is.” Our thoughts give us a picture into what we are really like, and this can be very

discouraging. If the mind is the “window of the soul,” our mindscape can betray an inner darkness that casts a shadow over our thoughts, words, and deeds. But our condition is not hopeless—and this is the point of the pages that follow.

This book is not designed to be an academic tome on cognitive or behavioral theory; rather, it is a practical guide for real people with real problems. It is written for everyone who has ever worried about anything!

And, it is written from a biblical perspective. Although composed long ago, the Bible is not irrelevant to our current worries, struggles, and desires. In every age and every culture God’s Word provides everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). The Bible is God’s “user’s guide” for all the equipment he has given us, including our minds. If you don’t share my beliefs about the Bible, *please don’t put this book aside* or immediately dismiss what you find on these pages. I’m guessing that you have already looked for answers elsewhere, but your mindscape is still cluttered with the same old scenery. Perhaps this is a good time for you to consider what the Bible says about the challenges that you face. I honestly believe that if you wrestle with the concepts introduced on these pages, new vistas will open in your own mindscape. You will experience a new way of thinking and, therefore, a new way of living—where you will gradually see your worries and fears replaced by a growing trust in God’s care for you.

Most of the Bible passages we will consider together come from a man who had the world on his shoulders. He had undertaken a monumental enterprise and had experienced opposition at every turn. Many who had

previously been his enthusiastic supporters were now his avowed enemies. The opposition he experienced was not merely in the form of hateful words and behind-the-back scheming. His opponents tried to “snuff him out” on several occasions and had at least gotten him thrown into jail for the time being. How would you feel if you were in such a situation? What scenery would clutter your mindscape? Would you be worried? Depressed? Bitter? Vindictive?

But he used this opportunity to write the most *joyful* of all his works. That’s right: the most *joyful!* The person whose words we will study is Saul of Tarsus, otherwise known as Paul the apostle, and his words were written from a jail cell. Our primary source is found in the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. If there was anyone who knew the troubles of this life, it was Paul.

What are the prominent features of your mindscape right now? Would you characterize the vistas of your thought life as filled with peace and joy or with worry and fear? How are these thoughts impacting your life? Your health? Your relationships?

You might be thinking, *It’s easy to say, “don’t be anxious,” but if I’m not supposed to have anxious, worried, or fearful thoughts, what am I going to think about?* Paul gives us a remarkable list of options. I’m sure this list is not exhaustive, but I’m also sure that these particular vistas are given to us by Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for a reason. Here they are:

Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. (Philippians 4:8 NIV 1984)

These are the vistas we will be looking at together. The expression “whatever” is often used as a throwaway phrase of apathy or indecision. We say it when we really don’t know how to respond—and usually with more than a hint of sarcasm! This usage of “whatever” has been anointed as the most annoying expression in conversation for the past several years.¹ Paul, however, follows up his “whatevers” with content that can change our mindscape and our lives. The words Paul uses would have been familiar to his readers. They are the vocabulary of the Greek philosophers and ethicists—ethical standards to which his readers should aspire.

Some have suggested, because of its common usage, Paul is merely encouraging his audience to at least respect and live up to the pagan morality around them. But this is not Paul’s style at all. He has already reminded the Philippians that their “citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). In the words of Moises Silva, “The idea that at this point in the letter Paul descends from such heights and asks his brothers merely to act like well-behaved citizens can hardly be taken seriously. Given the context...we must understand Paul’s list as representing distinctively Christian virtues.”²

The approach of this book will be to look at each of the vistas in the new mindscape one by one. As we proceed, there are a few principles you should keep in mind.

YOU CAN'T DO THIS YOURSELF

I suppose if you thought you could do this by yourself you wouldn't have picked up this book! But I want to emphasize up front that this is not a *self-help* book. Nor is this some new twist on Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking* approach. Trying to deal with your worries by just thinking positive thoughts is about as helpful as one little boy's understanding of his father's attempt at encouragement. The little boy came home discouraged about math class. He said, "Dad, I think I'm going to fail my math quiz tomorrow." His dad said, "Son, you are a good student. You need to be more positive." The boy thought for a moment and said, "I'm *positive* that I'm going to fail my math quiz tomorrow!" Not very helpful.

On my way home from work the other day, traffic was backed up and I found myself behind a car covered with bumper stickers. Every cause imaginable was represented. But the bumper sticker that caught my attention had this quote from the late reggae singer Bob Marley, "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds." Sounds nice, doesn't it? But have you ever tried to free your own mind? Don't think about a pink elephant. The same thing happens so often when we try to break old thought patterns. We determine not to worry or to be

jealous or angry or lustful ... but there it is. How can we change? Where is our help? What is the key?

YOU NEED A NEW OPERATING SYSTEM

Computers are a great challenge for me. As long as they do what they're supposed to do I'm fine, but when something goes wrong I'm in big trouble. This is an even bigger problem when something happens with the operating system. Since the operating system runs all of the programs, when something happens to it the whole thing comes crashing down. "Virus" is used to refer to our physical health. But it seems that we hear about them just as frequently in reference to our computers. Computer viruses can be contracted through programs or even via email and can cause our operating systems to crash.

Think about the mind as your operating system. Our minds determine what we are going to say and what we are going to do. Our will to say or do is informed by our minds, and we engage the world on that basis. I've got some bad news for you: Our minds have a virus, and that virus is sin. This virus hasn't been "caught" from bad drinking water, another person's careless sneeze, or from an innocent-looking email, but is part of our being. After all, what do we mean when we say, "I'm only human," or "nobody's perfect?" We mean that imperfection and moral failure are characteristic of the human condition. How does this virus affect our minds? It starts with being determined to go our own way, not God's way. Since God made us and the whole universe, this really doesn't work out. But that doesn't

stop us from trying. We are always wanting to be someone we aren't—God! We try to live like we are the center of the universe. The sad result of going our own way is that we are selfish, not selfless, toward other people. Sin has infected *everyone* including you, me, and everyone you know.

If you doubt that this virus is part of our operating system at birth, watch toddlers. Have you ever noticed that children's self-absorbed wills become obvious at a very early age? They say "no!" when told to do something and "mine!" when told to share. We often call this the "terrible twos." Why is this the case? I like to explain this time in life merely as the time that children's sinful natures learn to walk and talk. As we grow older we become more sophisticated about masking the "mines" and the "no's," but they're still there.

You might think that you sin only when you consciously do what you know is wrong (and of course that is sin!). But sin is more than an isolated incident in our lives. One of the Greek words translated "sin" is an archery term meaning, "to miss the mark." There are many ways that we miss God's mark, and we do so without even realizing it because every part of our world and ourselves is impacted by sin. Even our minds are impacted by sin. I promised that this was not going to be a theological tome, but you need to know one theological term before we go any further. Theologians refer to the *noetic* effect of sin. In other words, the impact of sin on the way we think. This word is a direct descendent of the word *nous*, the Greek term for "mind." Our sinful words and deeds have to come from somewhere. They come from the self-focused desires that fill our

thoughts. They come from a sinful operating system. They come from self-involved, self-absorbed minds.

If you have any doubt about this, think about the Great Commandment given to us by Jesus, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and *with all your mind*” (Matthew 22:37, emphasis added). Do you know anyone who loves the Lord with *all* his mind, *all* the time? I don’t. This is why the Bible talks about the need for a transformed mind (Romans 12:1–2) and a renewed mind (Ephesians 4:34).

In reminding us about the Great Commandment, Jesus convicts us of the bad news of our great need. The good news is that he has done something that makes a new operating system possible. As the divine Son of God, he was the only person who *never* had a sinful thought. He lived in this world with all of the stress (and so much more) that we experience, but he never stopped trusting God. He never became paralyzed or self-absorbed. He was the only one who always loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that the answer to our problem is to “be like Jesus”—because we can’t. He was perfect. We are not. The reason Jesus came into the world was not merely to keep God’s standards perfectly but to take the consequences for our sins. He did this through his death on the cross, where he not only paid the penalty for our sins, but broke the power of sin for all who will believe in him. The question we need to ask ourselves isn’t “What would Jesus do?” but “What has Jesus done?”

Sin unaddressed is like a little dictator who insists on his own way. This dictator of our sinful nature is a

slave-maker and, apart from the grace of God, we are stuck with the old mindscape with no hope of breaking free. Through faith Jesus forgives our sins and provides the power for a new way of thinking through the gift of his Spirit. As John Owen wrote many years ago, “There can be no greater evidence of a renewed heart and mind than a change in the habit and stream of our thoughts.”³

Here is an important distinction to remember. While our forgiveness is instantaneous and complete when we believe, building a new mindscape is a *process* in which Jesus is at work in our lives over the long haul. When Paul speaks of our forgiveness, he uses “done-deal” language: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). The same idea is clearly seen in these words from John’s first letter, “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name’s sake” (1 John 2:12). All who believe in Jesus have the assurance that they are in right standing (justified) and have their sins forgiven. We are also assured that this establishes the beginning of something brand new in our experience. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The “new” also includes a new mindscape.

It is important to remember that the establishment of a new relationship with God through Jesus by faith is immediate, but the transformation of our lifestyle and way of thinking is not. We have been given a new operating system, but we are called upon to *use* it. Paul uses the analogy of changing our clothes to talk about

the *process* of change that occurs in our lives, “in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be *renewed in the spirit of your mind*, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Ephesians 4:22–24 NASB, emphasis added). As you can see, this includes taking off the old way of thinking and putting on a new way of thinking. He puts it another way in the book of Romans. “Do not be conformed to this world, *but be transformed by the renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2, emphasis added). The word translated “transformed” is in the present tense. The transformation of your mindscape is an ongoing process. The word itself provides another picture for us. It is the word from which we get our word *metamorphosis*, which describes the process of the growth and development of an organism. When we hear this word, most of us think about the stages of the butterfly, from egg to caterpillar to pupa to adult. In every case the word *metamorphosis* is used to describe progress and growth.

This is what we should expect to experience in our new mindscape: a gradual progression and transformation in the way we think. The problem with the quick fixes of this self-help world is that they fail to address the most fundamental problem: our flawed operating system. I hope you can see that the answer to a transformed mindscape doesn't come from the outside in but through transformation from the inside out. This

transformation occurs as we daily go to Jesus in faith and ask for his power to change, to listen, and to think differently. This leads us to another important principle.

A NEW MINDSCAPE LEADS TO A NEW LIFESCAPE

As we look at each of the vistas of the new mindscape, we are going to see how important each one is to the way we live. The Lord's purpose is comprehensive and holistic with the goal of impacting not only the way that we think, but the way we live. The words of Paul immediately following the passage upon which we are focusing make this point. "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—*practice these things*, and the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9, emphasis added). When there is a change in the way we think, there will be a definite change in our words and actions as well. This will be one of the important bonus benefits of this study.

HOW WE WILL PROCEED

Are you ready to begin dismantling the old way of thinking? Are you tired of worrying about everything? Do you want to be finished with fear? Here's how we'll do it:

- First, we'll take a few moments to define each of the vistas in Philippians 4:8, by looking at the concept captured by the word Paul uses.

- Next, we'll look at the old mindscape and the troubles caused by the old way of thinking.
- Then, we'll take some time to observe and admire the new mindscape.
- Finally, we'll examine how this vista of the new mindscape impacts our new lifescape.

At the end of each chapter will also be a few questions (Food for Thought) to help you apply the principles discussed. There will also be suggested memory verses to help plant these principles in your minds.